

## Article

# From Zero Tolerance to Student Success in Ontario, Canada

Educational Policy

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[epx.sagepub.com](http://epx.sagepub.com)**Sue Winton<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

Since 2003, Ontario, Canada's high school graduation rates have increased 13% while suspensions and expulsion rates have simultaneously decreased. This article examines relationships between the province's safe school policy and Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18), a policy designed to increase graduation rates. Analyses of teachers' perceptions, policy texts, provincial data, and an external evaluation of SS/L18 suggest that efforts to increase graduation rates through SS/L18 may also be helping to reduce suspensions and expulsions—perhaps to a greater extent than recent changes to Ontario's safe schools policy, including the elimination of zero tolerance and adoption of a progressive discipline approach.

**Keywords**

educational policy, high schools, dropouts, zero tolerance

Can school systems increase graduation rates and reduce suspension and expulsion rates at the same time? This is what is happening in public high schools in Ontario, Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a). In this article I examine two policies in Ontario: Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18) and the province's revised safe schools policy. In particular, I consider how efforts to increase high school graduation rates

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through SS/L18 may also be helping to reduce suspensions and expulsions—perhaps to a greater extent than recent changes to Ontario's safe schools policy, including the removal of zero tolerance and an emphasis on progressive discipline and ongoing support for suspended and expelled students.

Since SS/L18 was introduced in 2003, graduation rates have increased 13% (from 68% to 81%), suspensions have decreased from 7.03% to 4.54% of students, and expulsions have decreased from 0.09% to 0.07% (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a).<sup>1</sup> A number of changes to the province's safe schools policies have been introduced during this time as well. In 2009 I undertook a small study to understand how changes to Ontario's safe schools policy are affecting teachers, students, and school safety. What I found surprised me: The teachers I interviewed suggest SS/L18 is having a greater influence on student behavior and suspension and expulsion rates than are changes to Ontario's safe schools policy. Findings from this initial study encouraged me to examine the two policies in depth and explore relationships between them.

This article will interest education stakeholders concerned about graduation rates and students at risk of not completing high school, critics of zero tolerance policies who have called for alternative approaches to maintaining order and safety in schools, and those who recognize a relationship between student achievement and school discipline practices (e.g., American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Noguera, 2003). Critics of zero tolerance propose targeted academic and emotional supports for students at risk of academic failure and misbehavior, caring relationships, and developmentally appropriate interventions that focus on correction and learning from one's mistakes as alternatives to zero tolerance for maintaining safe schools and promoting positive behavior. SS/L18 incorporates these strategies.

I begin with an overview of the context of education in Ontario since 1995. I describe secondary school reforms, concerns about increasing early school leaving rates<sup>2</sup> related to these reforms (King, Warren, Boyer, & Chin, 2004), and SS/L18. Next, I describe Ontario's changing policy approaches to addressing school safety and student misbehavior. Then, I present the perspectives of a small group of teachers on the impact of changes to the province's safe schools policy 1 year after they became law. I present data from Ontario's Ministry of Education and findings from an evaluation of SS/L18 (Ungerleider, 2008) that support the teachers' perceptions that SS/L18, Ontario's strategy for helping more students graduate, may be impacting changes in student behavior and suspension and expulsion rates.

## **Secondary School Reforms and Safe Schools**

The province of Ontario, Canada has seen three governments and a plethora of educational policy changes since 1990. In Canada, each province and territory is responsible for providing education for its citizens. This brief historical review focuses on policy initiatives related to Ontario's secondary schools and school safety since the "Common Sense Revolution." The Common Sense Revolution refers to the political agenda of the Conservative government elected in 1995. This agenda included many changes in education including major reforms to Ontario's secondary schools and the introduction of a get-tough approach to school safety.

The reforms to Ontario's secondary schools included a new, more standardized, curriculum; the reduction of high school from 5 years to 4 years; the reintroduction of tracking students in Grade 9; higher graduation requirements; the reduction of high school streams from three to two streams; standardized report cards; and a literacy test requirement for high school graduation (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2006). These reforms were phased in beginning in September 1999, and concerns about the new curriculum and its impact on high school graduation rates followed within a few years of implementation. In a multiphase study of the effects of Ontario's reorganized secondary school program on postsecondary education and graduation rates, King, Warrant, Boyer, and Chin (2004) reported that the 4-year and 5-year graduation rates for students had decreased since the reforms (from 78% to 70%) and were considerably lower than those in other provinces. Recognizing that failure to earn required credits in Grade 9 and Grade 10 is the biggest factor affecting Ontario's graduation rate, the investigators recommended that remediation begin during the first semester of Grade 9, opportunities for "credit recovery" be available, and courses be more closely tailored to students' abilities and goals (King et al., 2004). After taking office, Ontario's new government reported that the province's 5-year graduation rate in 2003-2004 was 68% and committed to increase it to 85% by 2010 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

## **Early School Leavers and High School Completion**

The costs of not completing high school are high (Rumberger, 1993). Individuals who do not graduate have higher rates of unemployment, lower income, less social support, and higher incidence of substance abuse (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005). Society is also affected

through early leavers' greater reliance on welfare and unemployment benefits, lower tax contributions, and higher crime rates when compared with high school graduates (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005). Thus, much research has been undertaken to understand who leaves school before graduating, who graduates on time, and what schools and systems can do to increase graduation rates.

There are multiple influences and pathways that may lead students to leave school before graduating (Jimerson, Reschly, & Hess, 2008; Rumberger, 1993). Individual, institutional, and societal factors have been identified as predictors (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005; Stout & Christenson, 2009). Individual factors include visible minority group status; male; highly mobile; overage for grade; having a disability; newcomer to Canada; speaking English as a Second language; and low socioeconomic status (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005; Jimerson et al., 2008; Rumberger, 1993). Students' educational experiences are also related. Low academic achievement, discipline problems, truancy, and absenteeism are associated with leaving school early (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005).

Student engagement has emerged as a critical factor for high school completion (Stout & Christenson, 2009). Leaving school early is understood as a process of disengagement from school that may begin years before students actually leave (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005; Finn, 1989; Jimerson et al., 2008; Rumberger, 1993). The concept of engagement is multifaceted. Stout and Christenson (2009) identify four subtypes of engagement: academic; behavioral; cognitive; and affective. Finn (1989) identified behavioral and emotional aspects as part of his participation-identification model. The behavioral component of engagement includes being involved in class-related and extracurricular activities whereas the psychological component involves students' sense of belonging and valuing success in school-related goals (Finn, 1989).

Institutional factors contributing to leaving early and graduating have also been investigated. A study of early school leavers in Ontario undertaken by the Community Health Systems Resources Group for the Ministry of Education identified important community factors; it determined that students from socially unstable, poor, high crime, gang-ridden and unsafe neighborhoods and areas with a high percentage of single-parent families, adult early leavers, ethnic/minority and blue-collar families and high unemployment rates are at higher risk for not completing high school (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005).

The Community Health Systems Resources Group (2005) also identified school factors related to early leaving including teachers' lack of cultural competency, racism, cultural inappropriateness of the curriculum, large

school and class sizes; negative school culture; ineffective discipline; lack of support services; negative relationships with teachers and administrators; bullying; lack of teacher support; and punitive policies such as zero tolerance. In addition, many students leave school as a result of difficulties associated with transitioning from middle school to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Jimerson et al., 2008; Somers, Owens, & Piliawski, 2009).

Research on graduation rates finds that people in schools can make a difference (Knesting, 2008). Communicating caring to students and focusing on building caring relationships helps all students, not just those students who are at risk of leaving early (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007). Caring relationships promote students' sense of belonging, which leads to greater investments and attachments to school (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Knesting, 2008). Collaborative relationships between teachers are also important as they create positive environments for teaching and learning (Portelli et al., 2007).

Creating caring environments and relationships are two universal practices recommended by Jimerson et al. (2008) in their three-tier model of school-based interventions. Other universal practices (Tier 1 in the model) include high quality early learning experiences; numerous opportunities for students to experience academic success in school; good instruction by caring teachers who push students and connect school learning to students' goals, communities, and recent events; many opportunities for student participation in a range of extracurricular activities; and systemic reform of school policies (e.g., class size, grade retention, and discipline).

Tier 2 practices in Jimerson et al.'s (2008) model are targeted to students who are at greater risk of leaving early because of academic failure and/or behavior. The practices include early identification of academic and behavior problems; mentoring programs where kids get individualized academic help and experience caring relationships; monitoring attendance, lates, and behavioral referrals; and supporting students through transitions between school levels. Tier 3 interventions are for kids at highest risk of leaving early include help for kids' personal problems (e.g., mental health issues), alternate school programming (e.g., smaller classes, acceleration, and self-directed learning) and support for those who leave school early (e.g., following up with the students, daycare, night school, and alternate ways to earn high school diploma).

## **Student Success/Learning to 18**

The Student Success initiative was launched by Ontario's new government to address concerns about Ontario's graduation rate. The Learning to 18 component of SS/L18 refers to an amendment to the *Education Act* in 2005

that requires students be enrolled in an education program until they are 18 or graduate. Ontario's Ministry of Education explains that the SS/L18 "helps students in Grades 7 to 12 tailor their education to their individual strengths, goals and interests" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011b). The goals of SS/L18 are to increase the graduation rate to 85% and reduce the early school leaving rate; enable good outcomes for all students; provide new and relevant learning opportunities to students; build on students' interests and strengths; and enable effective transitions from elementary to high school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011b; Ungerleider, 2008).

SS/L18 includes a number of initiatives: An expansion of cooperative education; e-learning; dual credits; school-college-work initiatives; specialist high skills majors; a focus on transitions from elementary to high school; apprenticeship programs; teaching resources for numeracy and literacy; credit rescue and recovery; dedicated personnel; and reengagement support for returning students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011b). SS/L18 has evolved over time with new initiatives introduced and others modified. Below I briefly introduce key components of SS/L18.

Some of the initiatives focus on experiential and career-focused learning. Specialist High Skills Majors, for example, are course bundles that focus on career fields such as agriculture, hospitality and tourism, and the environment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). Their purpose is to enable students in Grades 11 and 12 to focus on a career path while completing their diploma requirements. Students also gain work experience and earn industry-related certifications. Not all schools or boards offer all high skills majors. Students can earn also earn credits and job experience by participating in cooperative (coop) education or Ontario's Apprenticeship Program. Students in coop and the apprenticeship program earn credits toward their compulsory credit requirements. They can also take additional coop credits. Dual credits are also designed to provide students with an alternate learning environment and one more closely connected with their future goals. Dual credits enable students to earn credits in colleges that count toward high school graduation requirements and also serve as college prep credits (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a).

Some initiatives focus on incoming students whereas other initiatives are designed for those who have already left school or who may be close to doing so. There is an emphasis on helping students make a smooth transition from elementary to high school. Supports may include orientation programs, customized timetables, and/or an assigned adult or classroom to support incoming students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). Schools also are able to support students who have left school or who are struggling by creating

unique and flexible individualized programs designed to reengage students and help them earn credits (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a)

Other SS/L18 initiatives focus on helping current students earn traditional course credits. There are online courses so students can take courses not offered at their school and/or earn credits in an alternate setting and pace. There are also credit rescue and recovery programs. Credit rescue programs are designed to identify students at risk of failing a course and providing support before they fail to earn the credit. Credit recovery programs are for students who have failed a course; they provide support to help students meet expectations for aspects of the course they failed rather than having to take the entire course again.

In addition to program additions and changes, a large emphasis in SS/L18 is on creating a culture of individualized attention and caring (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a). Creating this culture includes training for principals and teachers as well as the creation of Student Success Teams. These teams are composed of teachers, an administrator, and a guidance counselor who support and track the progress of individual students. There are also dedicated Student Success Teachers (SSTs) who are responsible for supporting students who may be struggling to achieve course credits through credit recovery or credit rescue. They also often teach locally developed Life Skills courses.

Teachers interviewed about Ontario's safe schools policy suggest efforts to establish a culture of caring in secondary schools as a means of helping students graduate has also helped reduce behavior problems and ultimately lower suspension and expulsion rates. Before exploring this possibility and teachers' perceptions further, I briefly review the history, critiques, and outcomes of Ontario's safe schools policies since 2000.

## **Ontario's Safe Schools Act**

In 2000, Ontario's legislature passed the Safe Schools Act (2000) which was soon followed by Ontario's first *Code of Conduct* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001). Although not Ontario's first policy to explicitly address school safety, the *Safe Schools Act* adopted a much tougher approach to dealing with offenders than its predecessor, the *Violence-free Schools Policy*. It also centralized and standardized school violence policy: The *Violence-free Schools Act* required school boards to develop and implement policies to prevent and respond to violence whereas the *Safe Schools Act* outlined specific infractions that would result in automatic suspension or expulsion from Ontario schools. The new policy mirrored many of the zero tolerance policies introduced throughout the United States of America since

the 1990s (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Ayers, Ayers, & Dohrn, 2002). Zero tolerance approaches mandate that offenders be punished uniformly and require students committing certain acts to be suspended or expelled without consideration of factors surrounding their actions (Kajs, 2006; Skiba et al., 2006).

Ontario's *Safe Schools Act* cannot be characterized as strictly zero tolerance because it allowed for circumstances in which suspensions or expulsions were not mandatory including those in which the student was not able to control his/her behavior, the student was not able to understand the foreseeable consequences of his/her behavior, or if the student's continuing presence in the school did not create an unacceptable risk to the safety of anyone in the school (Bhattacharjee, 2003; Daniel & Bondy, 2008). After the first year of implementation, the rate of suspension and expulsion across the province increased 1.49% and 0.06% respectively. After 4 years the suspension rate had increased from 5.11% to 7.03% (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, 2010b) and the rate of expulsion increased almost one full percent—from 106 students to 1,908 students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). Administrators interpreted the *Safe Schools Act* and applied zero tolerance differently across and within Ontario school districts (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

## **Concerns About Zero Tolerance and Policy Alternatives**

Advocates of zero tolerance argue that removing dangerous students makes schools safer and more conducive for learning for the students who remain. They also suggest that it makes school discipline more consistent and deters misbehavior. There is little evidence to support any of these claims (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Daniel & Bondy, 2008; Kajs, 2006; Skiba et al., 2006). Instead, zero tolerance is most often applied for nonserious offenses rather than serious crimes. Students who are suspended or expelled experience serious long term consequences (Skiba et al., 2006). They suffer academically, have trouble returning to school, have poor relationships with teachers, and develop negative attitudes toward adults in the education system (Brown, 2007; Cassidy, 2005; Kajs, 2006). Further, zero tolerance policies have a disproportionately negative impact on racial minority students, students with special needs, poor students, and academically failing, White students (Bhattacharjee, 2003; Casella, 2003; Daniel & Bondy, 2008).

Ontario's Ministry of Education launched its review of the *Safe Schools Act* in December 2004 as mandated by Ontario's *Education Act*. The *Safe Schools Action Team* (2005a) was established to determine what about the law was working and where improvements could be made. In 2005, Ontario's Human Rights Commission (OHRC) charged that "the application of the *Safe Schools Act* and related school discipline policies [were] having a disproportional impact on racialized students and students with disabilities" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005). The OHRC is "an independent statutory body, [that] provides leadership for the promotion, protection and advancement of human rights, and builds partnerships across the human rights system" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2009). Following an investigation, including examination of internal government documents, interviews with Black community members in the Greater Toronto Area, and research findings that racial minority students in high school were more likely to perceive discriminatory treatment from teachers than White students (Ruck & Wortley, 2002), the OHRC filed an official complaint against the Ontario Ministry of Education (Bhattacharjee, 2003; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005). A settlement was reached between the OHRC and the government in 2007 and included the government's acknowledgement of "the widespread perception that the application of the current safe schools provisions of the *Education Act* and related regulations and policies can have a disproportionate impact on students from racialized communities and students with disabilities can further exacerbate their already disadvantaged positioning society" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2007). The Terms of Settlement also included the government's commitment to review the safe schools provisions and remove any references to zero tolerance in government documents (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2007).

Zero tolerance is not the only policy option. Alternatives to zero tolerance for maintaining school safety include a combination of universal preventative programs, targeted early and on-going support for children at risk, and a progressive discipline approach (including the consideration of mitigating factors when making discipline decisions; American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008). Universal prevention programs promote the mental and social well-being of all students and include mentoring, tutoring programs, extracurricular activities, bullying prevention, character education, and opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and express their views (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010). Explicit efforts are undertaken to reconnect students alienated from school or at risk for school violence or misbehavior, and threat assessments may be used to understand the gravity of a student's threats (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010).

The APA's Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) recommends safe schools policies that require school professionals to consider the circumstances surrounding an incident, recognize the students' previous behavior and opportunities for support, and draw on a range of interventions designed to correct misbehavior rather than simply punish it. In Ontario, this approach is called progressive discipline (Roher, 2008). Interventions may include parent meetings; peer mediation; restorative justice; verbal reminders; detentions, reviews of expectations; alternative learning environments; in-school suspension; voluntary service to the school community; or problem-solving plans developed by students and accompanied by regular meetings with an adult to check in on the progress of solving the problem (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Roher, 2008). Suspensions and expulsions remain options but are not automatic consequences and should be used after other efforts have failed. The APA Task Force (2008) also recommends communication and coordination between schools, communities, parents, law enforcement, the juvenile justice system and mental health providers to increase the resources available to schools and parents dealing with serious offenders.

Notably, many strategies proposed as alternatives to zero tolerance are also recommended as strategies to support and engage students at risk of leaving early of school (e.g., alternate learning environments, peer mediation, mentoring, and meetings with designated adults to monitor progress, academic support, and extracurricular activities). There is a "complex interplay" of academic achievement, disruptive behavior and school violence, and prevention programs that is not well understood (Cornell & Mayer, 2010, p. 9). This complexity reflects the relationships between student engagement, academic failure, and misbehavior. Students who struggle academically are suspended more than those who do not struggle (Arcia, 2006). Suspended students have higher early leaving rates than students who have never been suspended (Arcia, 2006). Students who are suspended or expelled struggle academically when they return to school and become less engaged with school (Arcia, 2006; Brown, 2007; Gregory et al., 2010). Students who are disengaged from school have lower academic achievement, more misbehavior, and are less likely to graduate.

## **Bill 212: Progressive Discipline and School Safety**

Bill 212, *An Act to Amend the Education Act in Respect of Behavior, Discipline and Safety*, was passed by Ontario's legislature in 2007. The revisions in *Education Act* to its safe school provisions reflect the recommendations

of the Safe Schools Action Team, the Terms of Settlement between the OHRC and the government, and researchers. First, there are no longer mandatory expulsions. Now, students who commit acts that previously led to automatic expulsion must instead be suspended while principals conduct an investigation to determine whether the student should be recommended for expulsion to the school board. Mitigating factors must be taken into account by the principal when considering his/her recommendation. Mitigating factors include: the student's history; whether a progressive discipline approach has been used with the student; whether the activity for which the student may be or is being suspended or expelled was related to any harassment of him/her because of his or her race, ethnic origin, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation or to any other harassment; how the suspension or expulsion would affect the student's ongoing education; and the student's age (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

The revised also law mandates that at least one program for suspended students and at least one program for expelled students be offered by each board. Expelled students who have completed a program for expelled students must be readmitted to the board following its completion. Further, behaviors that led automatically to suspension under the initial *Safe Schools Act* are now behaviors that *may* lead to suspension. The revised law includes bullying as one such behavior; and again, mitigating factors must be considered.

Principals' mandated consideration of mitigating factors when considering disciplinary actions is part of the government's new progressive discipline approach to creating and maintaining safe schools. Ontario's approach combines universal programs (e.g., character education, bullying prevention), on-going and early intervention interventions for students at risk (e.g., more psychologists, social workers, and child and youth workers in schools), and disciplinary responses that vary in light of previous conduct, prior opportunities for support as well as mitigating factors (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b). The government allocated CAD43.7 million to support these and other changes (Steenkamp, 2007).

## **Expectations for/of Policy Changes**

Policy is much more than a text or legislative act. It is a field of activity comprised of texts, discourses, practices, and influences at multiple levels (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992; Hogwood & Gunn, 1990; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Vidovich, 2007). Bowe et al., (1992) propose that policy is a cycle composed of three interconnected contexts: The context of influence, the context of policy text production, and the context of practice. In the context

of influence, various groups struggle over the construction of formal policy. Competing discourses develop and circulate. Historical, social, economic, and political influences are important as well. Texts *representing* policy decisions are produced in the context of policy text production. The third context, the context of practice, is the area that policy decisions aim to influence. It includes what people do (or do not do) in this context as well as the effects of these actions. New mandates produce both anticipated and unanticipated effects because they enter school contexts with unique cultures, practices, histories, and patterns of inequity (Ball, 1993; Bascia, 2001).

Policies are interpreted and re-created by individuals and stakeholder groups with differing values, beliefs, and goals (Ball, 1993; Bowe et al., 1992). In schools, teachers are policymakers as they interpret, re-create, and make sense of policy directives and initiatives in light of their existing knowledge, beliefs, and experience (Ozga, 2000; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Teachers tend to view new ideas as similar to familiar ones or integrate new ideas into existing beliefs and practices (Spillane et al., 2002). Government policies mandating changes in practice that challenge teachers' beliefs and knowledge pose a greater challenge to teachers than policies that do not challenge teachers' fundamental purposes, expectations, or ideas (Spillane et al., 2002). Motives, emotions, and organizational, historical, and social contexts also affect how teachers understand policy mandates (Spillane et al., 2002). Local resources, capacity, and communities further affect how policies look in schools (McLaughlin, 1987; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997).

New policies interact with existing ones. Joshee and Johnson (2007) propose a web metaphor to conceptualize how policies are related. They envision an orb spider web wherein the rings represent the different levels where policies are made. The linear (but not necessarily straight) threads that connect the rings represent shared areas of interest at different levels but their approaches may not complement one another. The points where the threads cross the rings represent policy texts constructed as a result of historical struggles. The spaces between the threads represent the opportunities for interpretation, appropriation, and resistance to policies. Rather than envisioning the points where the rings and threads cross as discrete policy texts like Joshee and Johnson (2007), I think of these points as policy cycles. Thus, in my conceptual policy web (Winton, 2012), not only are policy texts connected to one another, but also the three contexts of policies are connected to contexts of influence, text production, and practice in other cycles within and between different levels of policy as well.

This article examines connections between SS/L18 and Safe Schools policy cycles at the provincial and school levels. These connections may help

explain why Ontario's suspension and expulsion rates have decreased since 2004-2005 even though the province's safe schools policy was not revised (including the removal of zero tolerance and the introduction of progressive discipline) until 2008.

## **Methodological Approaches**

The significance of SS/L18 on suspension and expulsion was suggested to me by the teachers I interviewed in spring 2009 in hopes of understanding their perceptions of the impact of revised *Safe Schools* provisions just over a year after they went into effect. The findings from this small study became a starting point for my investigation into connections between Ontario's SS/L18 and safe schools policies. Below I describe the methodology of the initial study, the reanalysis of the initial data, and the methodology of the subsequent policy analysis.

To recruit participants for the initial study I sent letters to professional contacts in education in Ontario asking them to forward a letter of invitation to participate in the study to their own contacts in the field. The invitation asked interested teachers to contact me directly upon which we arranged a mutually convenient time for an interview. This recruitment process yielded six participants. Each is a teacher in a publicly funded, English-speaking secondary school Ontario, Canada. Participants did not identify their schools or school districts, although they provided some descriptive information about their current position and/or schools.

The first participant, Allison, is a Student Success teacher in a high school with 2100 students. She also teaches Careers and runs a program to train students in the upper grades to mentor Grade 9 students. The second teacher, Bob, teaches science to Grades 9 and 10 as well as chemistry in the upper grades. He's been teaching at his current school for 8 years and has 25 years of teaching experience. The third participant, Carol, has been teaching for about 14 years, 8 of those in her current school. She is the department leader for International Languages and teaches Latin and History. The fourth teacher, Donna, has also been teaching for 8 years at her current school. She is now the head of Special Education but began as an English teacher. The fifth teacher, Earl, provided little information about his position; however he mentioned that he sits on his school's Safe Schools committee. Similarly, Francesca, the sixth teacher, said little about her current teaching position but described her school as one of three high schools in a small town. Her school has students from Grades 7 to 12. Five of the participants are Caucasian. One participant, Earl, did not disclose his racial identity.

This sample is limited in a number of ways. First, only six teachers participated. Although qualitative research does not aim to generalize beyond the experiences of study participants, the small number of participants means that the initial study's research question may not have been adequately answered. Second, the participants may not have been in the best positions to observe changes in practice and outcomes resulting from changes to the province's Safe School legislation as suspension decisions are made by administrators. Recognizing these limitations, I examined other sources of data to investigate whether the observations of the sample might be evident elsewhere and to understand what might explain what the teachers observed. These sources include data from the Ontario Ministry of Education; numerous policy texts linked to SS/L18 and Safe Schools; findings from the Canadian Council on Learning's (CCL's) evaluation of SS/L18 (Ungerleider, 2008); and related research (e.g., Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005).

The interviews were conducted between May and July in 2009. Changes to Ontario's *Safe Schools* policy took effect February 1, 2008. Thus, the interviews took place 15 to 17 months later. Four semistructured interviews were conducted in person and two were conducted by telephone. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

The interview transcripts were read multiple times. Initially, I coded the data into categories corresponding to the study's research question; these categories were suspensions; expulsions; progressive discipline; mitigating factors; impact on students with special needs; impact on racialized students; impact on teachers; and impact on school safety. As I analyzed the data for these themes, others emerged as recurring and important to teachers including SS/L18; prevention initiatives; and alternatives to suspension. I then did a secondary analysis of the data categorized as SS/L18. I highlighted all references to SS/L18 and/or its components in the transcripts and categorized them into the following subcategories: Individualized approach; relationships; transitions; credit recovery; and caring. Next, I examined the CCL's evaluation of SS/L18 (Ungerleider, 2008), government data, and other research for findings and additional information to confirm, challenge, and understand what teachers reported was occurring in their schools.

The CCL's evaluation was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 aimed to develop an inventory and descriptions of SS/L18 programs undertaken from 2003-2006. Data were collected through interviews with key informants, focus groups with Student Success Leaders (district level) and document analysis. Phase 2 aimed to provide a formative evaluation of the changes and impact of SS/L18. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through 311 interviews and focus groups with teachers, administrators,

parents, students, and school district officials from across the province. Quantitative data were collected through student and staff surveys (see Ungerleider, 2008 for more details). I was a member of the field research team in Phase 2 of the study. I conducted interviews and focus groups but did not have access to the data after submitting it to a professional transcription service. I was not involved in the data analysis.

On completing analyses of the interview data and examining it in light of the CCL's findings and data from other sources, I attempted to send a draft of the findings to the interview participants to determine whether I had adequately represented their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I sent the draft successfully to four teachers; two of the participants were unreachable. Of the four teachers contacted, only one commented on the draft. This participant stated she felt the analysis reflected her experience.

I now turn to a brief discussion of teachers' perceptions about the impact of the revised *Safe Schools Act* on school safety and show the revisions had little perceptible impact on the participants or their schools' safety at the time of the interviews. Then, I discuss the components of SS/L18 suggested by participants that may help explain why suspension and expulsion rates have decreased across Ontario since 2004-2005.

## **Findings**

### *Overall School Safety*

The teachers report that their schools are generally safe places for staff and students. They cite their own perceptions and experiences as well as those reported by students in school climate surveys (recommended by Ontario Safe Schools Action Team, 2005b). The teachers also note that their schools have not become more or less safe since the introduction of progressive discipline and the removal of mandatory suspensions.

Bob: I think most of the kids feel pretty safe at the school . . . I don't think it's any less safe now.

Carol: I don't think the school is any less or more safe than it was 2 years ago.

Earl: I sit on the . . . Safe School Committee actually. And so the results of the surveys for the past uh 2 years have shown that that the kids respond that yes they feel safe and they don't feel bullied. . . . I mean there's a small pocket minority that does but by and large they do feel safe.

Almost all teachers recognize, however, like Earl, that there are some students who probably do not feel safe.

Bob: [I]f you're talking about just personal safety there are kids that probably pick on other kids that we really don't see. I mean they tend to be quite secretive about it.

Carol: I think most kids feel safe but there is a segment that does not . . . I think there are some kids that are being bullied and targeted.

One teacher also stated that there are teachers in her school who feel unsafe because of students in her class who perhaps should be removed. She attributes the problem not to the removal of zero tolerance or other changes to the law, however, but to the decisions of the administrators.

Carol: There are certain teachers right now at my school who have students in their room who they absolutely do not feel safe being in that classroom because they've been targeted by those students or harassed by those students and yet administration has not done anything about it. And so it's at the point where they may be considering calling the police on their own [to] take care of the situation.

A few teachers also note that there are some places that are less safe than others. Another recognizes that the physical design of the school helps to keep the school safe.

Allison: . . . apparently the advice [Grade 9's] get given from other people and the word on the street is there are certain areas you don't go. If you want to stay out of trouble you go in . . . don't go into the woods behind your building. You . . . you stay away from smokers. Apparently I've heard rumours that . . . there're certain washrooms that Grade 9's for example are warned to stay away from . . . I think that the . . . the message though is if you want to stay out of trouble you can do that.

Carol: I think especially kids on buses often will feel less safe than kids that are walkers to the school with a lot of issues with uh things . . . on buses. Incidents happen on buses. I mean I've heard of people trying to light someone's hair on fire . . . throw a rock at them.

These findings reflect those of Astor, Meyer and Behre (1999) who report that school spaces that are not the responsibility of a designated person (such

as hallways and stairwells) are generally less safe than other places. They propose that schools adopt plans that ensure students, teachers, and other school community members are given ownership of these spaces to promote safety.

### *Progressive Discipline*

The Ontario Ministry of Education's progressive discipline approach includes promoting positive student behavior, preventing inappropriate behavior, providing more supports to students, and offering administrators discretion in determining disciplinary actions after their consideration of the circumstances surrounding the misbehavior. All the teachers report that components of this approach are evident in their schools to some degree.

In terms of universal programs promoting positive behavior and preventing misbehavior, teachers report that programs are present to some extent including character education, peer mediation, conflict resolution, antibullying initiatives, and a cyberbullying awareness event. When asked whether these programs are impacting school safety, teachers' responses were mixed. Character education and conflict resolution are described as short-lived, promoted infrequently, or "never really getting off the ground." Peer mentoring appears the most influential of the programs mentioned.

Francesca: I think the peer mentoring is probably the best of all of them because it gives chance . . . a chance for kids to connect and develop the relationship with . . . a stronger student

Establishing personal connections to prevent negative behavior is an explicit focus of Donna's school and a strategy she attributes to its safety. There are also police officers in two schools and a safe schools committee in another. Two teachers mentioned that there are security cameras in some locations as well.

The teachers reported few targeted supports for students deemed at risk for unsafe or disruptive behaviors specifically, however, as will be discussed in detail below, there are many academic supports in place for students at risk of not graduating, which teachers believe are affecting school safety. In addition to these academic supports, teachers in the study mention the support of Child and Youth Workers, school counselors, attendance counselors, someone designated to touch base with students coming back from suspension, and an administrator devoted to monitoring kids at risk (in one school). Three teachers suggested more professionals trained to work with students with mental illnesses are needed.

All of the teachers said they believe mitigating factors are taken into account by Vice Principals (VPs) when they are disciplining students in many cases.

Donna: I think they try. I think [VPs] try to collect information from classroom teachers, counselors, parents about why all these things may have happened, what has led to this . . . I think the . . . steps are to find out mitigating factors and then go from there.

Earl: Yeah. They do take them into account . . . they get an idea of what what's going on in the child, student's life maybe and what the academic picture is and what the history is . . . Like they have a context.

Three respondents noted that there are some circumstances in which mitigating factors are not considered because of the nature of the offence.

Carol: I mean if it's to the point where somebody has assaulted somebody, then I think that's an immediate type of suspension . . . and often involves the police etc.

Donna: [T]he VPs will get input before uh in a lot of cases . . . not in all cases some cases are just . . . they're cut and dry.

A few teachers believed that consideration of mitigating factors depends on the individual administrator's personality rather than new requirements to do so:

Carol: So there are some vice principals who take that into consideration and some kids if they know their home life isn't that great or if they have a parent at home that's not gonna be too nice to them they may not choose to suspend. But you have to have that background knowledge on the kid and you don't have that knowledge on all of them. . . . I know some of the VPs are will take that into consideration.

Francesca: [O]ur current principal had just come when the policy came in . . . she probably was considering mitigating circumstances all the way through whereas the principal we had who's gone to another school I'm guessing . . . you know, I did see a lot of personality coming out in the approach.

### *Suspensions and Expulsions*

Almost all teachers noted that there are fewer suspensions and/or expulsions now than in the past, but they did not attribute these changes to the revised safe schools policy. Some cite the personality of the VP as the explanation:

Carol: Depending on who is the administrator, who's dealing with that student. Some are more apt to suspend. And uhm others are not.

Francesca: I don't see any noticeable change uh since the policies came in . . .

Interviewer: Okay. So you wouldn't, you haven't noticed any differences in terms of ...the number of suspensions or expulsions . . .?

Francesca: Uhm no. Our previous principal was much more apt to suspend and remove kids.

Alison suggested the reason suspensions are down is because students are no longer suspended for not attending school. She attributes the change in this practice to SS/L18. Bob believes there are many factors influencing reduced suspensions:

Interviewer: You wouldn't attribute [changes in discipline practices] necessarily . . . not exclusively to changes regarding zero tolerance...?

Bob: No, no. I thi . . . I think there's way too many factors to take a look at

Finally, unlike the other teachers, Earl believes expulsions are down as a result of the changed policy and explains that now

Earl: they get into situations uh where they will [do] trades . . . between schools or make use of uh some alternative programming . . . [the] kids become mobile.

### ***Student Success/Learning to 18***

Although teachers in the study report that many components of the revised safe schools policy are in place, they consistently referred to SS/L18 as the main reason for the changes noted in their schools affecting suspension and expulsion. The teachers suggested that kids who are part of the SS/L18 initiative are often the same kids who misbehave in school. The connection between student misbehavior and student achievement recognized by these teachers is confirmed by research (e.g., Gregory et al., 2010). Low academic achievement is highly correlated with disciplinary infractions and aggressive behavior (Gregory et al., 2010).

SS/L18 involves many components. The components identified by participants in this study as influencing student discipline include an increased

focus on struggling students, a culture of caring and second chances, credit recovery, transition programs and a commitment to keeping students in school. In terms of focusing on students who are struggling academically, emotionally, and/or behaviorally, the teachers believe there are greater efforts to identify and support them. Allison describes

From a student success perspective it used to be four or 5 years ago about this time of year [May], if a kid was failing a teacher would say you know what it's not gonna happen for you. You might not... you might as well not show up . . . That doesn't happen anymore  
....

Donna: I think something that you're probably aware of would be the fact that we are mandated by the government to have school based team meetings for kids at risk. So what I'm finding in particular is that these kids who are your rule breakers are probably brought more to the forefront. And . . . instead of a punitive approach I'm finding it's more a collaborative approach between your vice principal, your counselors, your Special Ed, your CYW [child and youth worker], your attendance counselor to kind of come together and figure out what it is that's causing these issues.

Efforts to support struggling students include individualizing timetables and providing small group or one-to-one academic support.

Earl: And at each sort of reporting period . . . the resource teacher and the student services department have met and a team of teachers sit and sort of go over grades go over how students were succeeding and how they aren't . . . Then those students are placed. Their time table is modified and they're placed uh for a period of maybe two periods in in the student success room to recover credits or uh get tutoring. . . . they use that as a launch like to get kids extra help if they need it in other areas too

Donna: Right now we have the Grade 8s coming in with IEPs or [who are] at risk from our feeder schools. and specifically, our VP of the at risk kids, we look at each other and say we need to specifically time table this kid to have the right teachers to match [his/her] personality

Teachers dedicated to SSL18 provide more than academic support; they also offer an alternative for teachers and students when faced with discipline issues.

Allison: If it's a student that is consistently unable to function in a regular classroom . . . in student success sometimes those kids come up and work with us for a short period of time even . . . if it's . . . "So and so can't stop talking. Would it be okay if they went and worked on whatever with you guys?" And if we're in there we usually say sure. . . . Do we deal with discipline issues? Yeah, probably but much more from my perspective it's usually much more in a conversation. Like 'what's going on in that class and why can't you get along with the teacher?' and I mean that's my role right?

The CCL's evaluation (Ungerleider, 2008) similarly found that more attention is now given to individualizing students' timetables to align with their interests and strengths. The report also found that there is a new focus on monitoring individual students. Grade 9 students in particular are monitored closely in many schools, and Student Success Teams intervene at early signs of students struggling.

Other SS/L18 strategies aimed at supporting students struggling academically include giving students multiple chances to earn credits through credit rescue or credit recovery. These programs enable students to work one-on-one or in small groups with teachers in an alternative classroom environment and receive academic support and/or complete missed or failed assignments. These strategies promote a culture of second chances and commitment to students.

Allison: Because with credit recovery and all of these other things in place . . . those kids aren't being suspended for attendance. They're being dealt with on . . . other levels. They're being . . . counseled by a VP. . . . you know "get your mark up to between a 40 and a 49 and you can do credit recovery. Let's get you through."

Carol: I think for . . . a small segment of the population at school I think Student Success is great. They're . . . taking students aside, helping them out on an individualized basis, allowing them to get their credits, . . . I know of a few kids have really turned themselves around because of just that little bit of extra attention paid to them and saying looking we're gonna help you, we're gonna, you know assist you in getting your credit. You don't have to have wasted a whole year. And for some kids . . . when they fail they get that stigma of failing and then in turn they may act out in different ways so I do think it's good for some kids  
Donna: [The Student Success room] is a really supportive environment because kids those are failing can now come down to that room

and get credits. So they're just not experiencing all this failure all the time . . . which causes a self-esteem [issue] which can lead to a whole variety of, bunch of violent things

As suggested by Carol's statement above, not all teachers support credit recovery or credit rescue. They question whether multiple chances to earn credits will undermine efforts to teach students responsibility and/or undermine the value of a course credit.

Carol: I also find that for some kids I, I don't know if Student Success is making them all that successful when they've started to offer it to students who like they have 20% in their course and they . . . they go to credit recovery and maybe recover that credit by doing a few extra assignments and I don't know how well that's gonna benefit them in the future when they realize that they can get a credit for not really putting in the work and when you get a job in your future you can't...you know things aren't going to be handed to you on a plate like that. And I don't know if that's you know really what credit recovery or Student Success was meant to do . . . but it's happening.

Francesca: Student Success I think many of us struggle with it because it's removed students' responsibility

The teachers' remarks reflect what the CCL found in its evaluation of SS/L18 (Ungerleider, 2008). Almost 100% of staff survey respondents reported that they agree or strongly agree that credit recovery helps students earn course credits. However, only 65% agree or strongly agree that credit recovery prepares students for future courses, and only 57% believe it helps students prepare for postsecondary education or training. Further, the report found that there is wide variation in how the programs are implemented (Ungerleider, 2008).

Another component of SS/L18 identified by teachers as positively affecting student behavior and discipline is an explicit focus on building relationships. Donna and Allison explain

Donna: I do think we're safer because I think the connections we make with kids here is pretty good . . . there is usually a kid who is connected at least to one other teacher within our building because we also do that at a staff meeting at the beginning of the year. We . . . set up kind of a list and we go through and . . . we point out kids who don't seem to have a contact or are the loners and then a teacher

really makes a . . . concerted effort to touch base with them and kind of make a connection. So yeah that I think that's why. I think it's safe because of the relationships that have been formed between staff and students.

Allsion: I think the peer mentoring is probably the best [initiative] of all of them . . . because it gives chance . . . a chance for kids to connect and develop a relationship with . . . a stronger student. . . . My sense is that a lot of the frustrations for the kids that leads to the behavior is an inability to do what they're being asked to do. So by helping them succeed academically it helps reduce the behavior issues that are getting them into trouble . . . elsewhere. . . . so it's . . . the person who developed a relationship that. . . there is a sense of caring that develops too which I think is huge.

The CCL found much variation in the extent to which schools have successfully established cultures of caring and community (Ungerleider, 2008). The teachers' recognition of the importance of relationships and connections to behavior reflects research that school programs that emphasize creating positive school climates and caring and trusting relationships between students and teachers can prevent and address discipline problems (Freiberg & Lapointe, 2006).

A few teachers in the study suggested that new efforts to make the transition to high school easier for Grade 9s have helped alleviate problems with student behavior. Allison's school runs a Grade 9 orientation program.

Allison: The premise [of our program] is that you train . . . leaders who then work . . . to help transition and mentor grade nines. It's a yearlong program. . . we run an orientation the end of the summer. We train our leaders for two days then we run an orientation for a day. Ten Grade 9s link up with two leaders, senior leaders, eleven's or twelve's. . . . We run them through a bunch of fun activities, tours, all that kinda fun stuff and then we do activities throughout the year. . . . The feedback I get is that it does change the feeling of that first, especially that first week. Even the first day it becomes a lot calmer because they've already been in. They've already looked around. They've already got their time tables. They've already you know so that anxiety level decreases.

The CCL's evaluation of SS/L18 (Ungerleider, 2008) found that one of the most frequently cited academic benefits of SS/L18 is the smoother transition between elementary and secondary school for students. New efforts since SS/

L18 include conversations between elementary and secondary teachers about transitioning students and mentoring, leadership and/or orientation programs for incoming students. Many of these initiatives focus on problem solving, communication, and conflict resolution, and some offer opportunities for struggling students to take on leadership roles that are normally restricted to academically successful students. Opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and mentoring programs are recommended by the APA's Zero Tolerance Task Force (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008) as alternative approaches to maintaining school safety.

Allison's comment below reflects the CCL's finding that a systemic benefit of SS/L18 includes "a change in orientation from teaching to learning and with the need to ensure success for all students, irrespective of individual need or circumstance" (p. 31)

Allison: . . . it's a different era than it was even 5 years ago . . . you don't get to pick and choose who's in your classroom. Like I think it used to be that you know if you put enough pressure on a kid they'd just kind of fall off the radar and sometimes that was a good thing if they were a problem.

## **Policy Connections and Future Research**

Policies do not exist independently from other policies. Instead, new and existing policies interact (Bascia, 2001). I use a policy web to conceptualize how policies are related (Winton, 2012). This web is made up of various policy cycles; each cycle is composed of three contexts: The context of influence; contest of text production; and context of practice (Bowe et al., 1992). Each context may be related to other contexts across different policies. In the current study, participants suggest new practices and attitudes in SS/L18's context of practice are influencing outcomes in the province's safe schools policy's context of practice.

More specifically, SS/L18 to may be contributing to reduced suspension and expulsion rates through new practices designed to identify and support students who are struggling academically. Low academic achievement is highly correlated with discipline problems and aggressive behavior (Gregory et al., 2010; Sander, 2010). The academic supports provided by SS/L18 (e.g., credit rescue and recovery programs, dedicated teachers, personalized timetables, and close monitoring of struggling students) may be improving the academic achievement of students at risk of misbehavior. Another key component of SS/L18 is the development of cultures of caring. Schools with

programs emphasizing the creation of positive school climates and caring and trusting relationships between students and teachers are known to prevent and address discipline problems (Freiberg & Lapointe, 2006). Caring relationships promote students' sense of belonging, which leads to greater investments and attachments to school (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005; Fredricks et al., 2004; Kneesting, 2008).

The SS/L18 and safe schools policy cycles may be linked in other ways as well. The Ontario government's commitment to increase graduation rates and the introduction of L18 in SS/L18's context of influence may also help explain the decreasing suspension and expulsion rates in the context of practice of Ontario's safe schools policy. Administrators may feel pressure to keep students in school whom they would have excluded prior to SS/L18. More analysis specifically focused on the connections between the two policy cycles may yield additional connections and confirm those proposed here.

The finding that teachers in the study believe SS/L18 is influencing safe schools policy (including suspensions and expulsion) was unexpected; perhaps I should not have been surprised. Advocates for alternate approaches to zero tolerance and for supporting students at risk of misbehavior call for universal prevention programs (including mentoring, tutoring programs, extracurricular activities, bullying prevention, character education, and opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and express their views; American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Daniel & Bondy, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010), conscious efforts to reconnect disengaged students, and interventions such as peer mediation and alternative learning environments to address misbehavior (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; Roher, 2008). All of these programs are components of SS/L18.

The teachers' belief that SS/L18's increased focus on struggling students, culture of caring and second chances, credit recovery, transition programs, and commitment to keeping students in school is contributing to reduced suspension and expulsion rates echoes Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson's (2005) research that found that schools that "focus on positive, proactive disciplinary measures rather than reactive, punitive strategies have lower levels of youth delinquency" (p. 84).

However, as the study did not explicitly investigate teachers' perceptions of the impact of SS/L18 on safe schools policy research is needed to better understand the nature of the relationship (real and/or perceived) between SS/L18 and safe schools in Ontario. This research may provide additional support for the participants' belief that SS/L18 is contributing to decreasing suspension and expulsion rates rather than the elimination of zero tolerance and other safe schools initiatives. Supporters of zero tolerance may suggest

Ontario's reduced suspension and expulsion rates indicate the effectiveness of the approach as a deterrent to misbehavior. This explanation is doubtful as research suggests zero tolerance policies do not deter misbehavior (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008).

Additional research and provincial data are also needed to support or challenge participants' observations that the elimination of zero tolerance and the introduction of progressive discipline has had little impact on suspension and expulsion rates. The small sample likely did not capture the range of teachers' experiences, and the teachers interviewed may not have been in the best positions to observe the impact of Bill 212. Teachers may not be fully aware of outcomes attributable to the repeal of zero tolerance as its removal did not require changes to teachers' practice. Even though Ontario's original *Safe Schools Act* granted teachers the authority to suspend students, teachers were advised by their unions not to do so (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, 2007; Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, n.d.). So while Bill 212 repealed teachers' authority to suspend, they continued to refer discipline matters to the principal and vice principals as they had previously. The policy changes did not challenge teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs, or practice. SS/L18, however, aims to fundamentally change the culture of secondary schools and includes mandates and initiatives that more directly impact teachers' work (e.g., credit recovery, designated SS teachers, new courses) and possibly challenge their beliefs and self-image (Spillane et al., 2002). At best, the study provides a first glimpse of the impact of eliminating a zero tolerance approach to maintaining school safety and discipline for students, teachers, and school safety in Ontario.

Research is also needed to provide alternate perspectives on the impact of Ontario's revised safe schools policy and SS/L18 on student behavior and safety. It is essential to understand how these policies affect students as they are the people both policies intend to directly affect. Do students believe they are getting more support at school? Do they believe they are provided opportunities to learn and repair damage from mistakes rather than simply be punished for bad decisions? Students' voices are crucial for understanding whether the elimination of zero tolerance in Ontario has resulted in more equitable treatment for racialized students as neither school boards nor the province report, or in most cases, collect this data.

It is also necessary to explore administrators' perceptions because the changes related to suspensions and expulsions require changes to principals' handling of these discipline processes. Although the original *Safe Schools Act* allowed mitigating circumstances to be considered by principals, consideration is now mandatory. Administrators' perspectives can confirm or

challenge the perceptions of teachers in this study that administrators consider mitigating factors. Administrators can also identify challenges they face when disciplining students within the parameters of the revised policy and comment on the students they see in the office. Previous research by Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson (2002) suggests differences in suspension rates for different groups of students do not originate in the office but in classrooms. Administrators can also highlight pressures from the board, parents, and other sources that influence suspension and expulsion rates in the province. For example, the Ontario Principals' Council (2007) expressed concern that the new appeal process for suspensions may be difficult to implement, deter suspensions, and ultimately undermine school safety. Further, they can provide their perspectives on the relationship between SS/L18 and safe schools policies. Do they also believe the various components of SS/L18 are having a greater impact on suspensions and expulsions than changes to the Safe Schools Act? If so, which are the key components?

Ontario's declining rates of suspensions and expulsions and increasing graduation rates suggest moving from a zero tolerance approach to a progressive discipline approach does not compromise school safety and may work to reduce the number of early school leavers and increase graduation rates. Importantly, these policy changes have not compromised Ontario citizens' support for their schools: a recent survey of public attitudes toward education finds that their satisfaction is at record levels (Hart & Livingstone, 2009). This is good news for politicians looking for politically viable alternatives to zero tolerance and policy options that respond to calls to increase graduation rates, send more students to college, and reduce the costs associated with leaving school early.

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## Notes

1. Suspension and expulsion rates are calculated as the number of students suspended and expelled divided by total student enrollment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, 2010b).
2. Like the Community Health Systems Resource Group, I use the terms *early school leaving* and *early leavers* instead of “dropping out” or “drop out” in recognition that individuals leave school for a variety of reasons (including for some, being pushed out) and to redirect the emphasis on individual factors leading to leaving school early to systemic factors. An early school leaver is defined here as someone who leaves school before earning a high school diploma.

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